

IN MEMORIAM

**Harold A. Abramson, M. D.
1899-1980**



Doctor Harold A. Abramson, the co-founder and editor of this Journal for the past seventeen years, died in New York on September 29, 1980. Anyone closely acquainted with Harold and with his life's work, and precisely because of the very broad scope of this work—also anyone concerned with asthma as a perplexing human affliction, can recognize that the passing of this pioneer clinical scientist, humanist, medical educator, profound psychoanalyst and man of letters marks the final stage of an era of intellectual ferment and multidisciplinary probing into the mysteries of human existence, aspirations and suffering.

The future may reveal whether the fundamental studies of Dr. Harold Abramson and of his co-workers (two of whom, his closest confrere M. Murray Peshkin, M.D. and his indefatigable supporter, Israel Friedman,

sadly and, it seems, fatefully, also passed away within a six-month interval in 1980) will be remembered as a transient blossoming of mid-twentieth century medical thought, or whether these creative minds have encouraged the search for definitive answers to the proliferating problems of respiratory allergy. For the present, the "ontogeny" of Harold Abramson's scientific career may contribute to a better understanding of the "phylogeny" of the evolutionary changes taking place in the clinical and investigational approaches to asthma and related disorders.

Dr. Abramson during his long life remained a *clinical allergist*, i.e. a scientist dedicated to diseases of altered reactivity. In many respects, however, he was most exceptional. Early in his career, he acquired advanced knowledge and skills in basic immunology as well as in human physiology and pharmacology. Then, not as an escape, but on the contrary as a logical step in his intellectual pursuits, he devoted himself to psychoanalysis, psychopharmacology and psychosomatics. Indeed, in the permanent records of medical history, he is most likely to be remembered for his unique interest in individual patients and their "unfragmented personal lives." Among his many books, the 1956 work entitled "The Patient Speaks," which contains a day-to-day psychoanalytic record of a young woman with asthma and atopic eczema, is best known to allergists of our generation. Let it be noted in this respect that our departed friend, though very critical as a pharmacological investigator and extremely well informed as an analyst, never appeared rigid or dogmatic in his scientific attitude and did not actually belong to an immutable "school of thought." He was, instead, an abstract realist (if ever there was one!).

After graduating from the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University in 1923, Harold continued his medical studies in London and Berlin. Then he returned to the USA to take a position as an instructor at

Johns Hopkins and subsequently at Harvard from 1928 to 1931. From 1934 to 1935, he worked in immunology and related fields at Cornell. In the ensuing years, he held several positions, including that of Chief of the Allergy Clinic at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City. He remained affiliated with Columbia University as Assistant Professor of Physiology until 1959 and was a research psychiatrist at Mount Sinai Hospital, also being director of psychiatric research of the South Oaks Hospital in Amityville, L.I., N.Y. and a consultant in research psychiatry at the State Psychiatric Center in Central Islip, L.I., N.Y. until the time of his death. He was a Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association, the New York Academy of Medicine, the American College of Chest Physicians and the American College of Allergists, of which he was a past president. From 1957 to 1962, together with Dr. Murray Peshkin (who was instrumental in establishing the Denver Center) Harold visited the Jewish Home for Asthmatic Children—later to be known as the Children's Research Institute and Hospital—in Denver on the average of one three-day weekend each month and conducted clinical rounds and individual case analyses. Even for the inexperienced Allergy Fellows of the then minuscule house staff (among whom the present writer was included) it was easy to appreciate Dr. Abramson's profound understanding of the

totality of human psychosocial dynamics and pathophysiologic somatic reactivity. Most provocative was Dr. Abramson's theory of the Cronus Complex—i.e., a parent, like the pre-Olympian god Cronus, or (in Latin) Saturn, devouring his children—a phenomenon observed in some cases when a parent “engulfed” an asthmatic child in “love” and overprotection, but actually a reflection of the universal order, where Khronos—an ancient pun, denoting Time—destroys what Time has created!

The Asthmatic Children's Foundation of New York, The Association for the Care of Asthma, and their affiliates had Dr. Abramson as their co-founder in 1962–63. Also in 1963 the Asthma Publications Society was founded, with Harold one of the principals. He became the editor of *The Journal of Asthma Research* (now renamed *Journal of Asthma*) and ably directed the course of this publication until his recent death. More can be added to the list of Dr. Abramson's contributions, publications, titles and honors. But, as the sincere, unassuming person he was, he must primarily be remembered and honored as a dedicated, unselfish, noble man, whose knowledge, experience and inquisitive mind were devoted to the service of his patients and to the understanding of the constellation of abnormalities associated with asthma.

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